The Syrian Community in New Castle and Its Unique Alawi Component, 1900-1940

by Anthony B. Toth

I. *Introduction*

INDUSTRIALIZATION and immigration are two important and intertwined phenomena in Pennsylvania's history from 1870 to World War II. The rapid growth of mining, iron and steel production, manufacturing, and railroads during this period drew millions of immigrants. In turn, the immigrants had a significant effect on their towns and cities. The largest non-English-speaking groups to join the industrial work force — the Italians and Poles — have been the subjects of considerable scholarly attention.[1] Relatively little, however, has been published about many of the smaller but still significant groups that took part in the "new immigration."

New Castle's Syrian community is one such smaller group.[2] In a general sense, it is typical of other Arabic-speaking immigrant communities which settled in American industrial centers around the turn of the century — Lawrence, Fall River, and Springfield, Mass.; Provi-

Writer and editor Anthony B. Toth earned his master's degree in Middle East history from Georgetown University. He performed the research for this article while senior writer for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee Research Institute. He has also written articles on the Arab-American communities in Jacksonville, Florida, and Worcester, Massachusetts.—Editor

1 Anyone researching the history of immigrants and Pennsylvania industry cannot escape the enlightening works of John E. Bodnar, who focuses mainly on the Polish and Italian experiences. In particular, see his *Workers' World: Kinship, Community and Protest in an Industrial Society, 1900-1940* (Baltimore, 1982); *Immigration and Industrialization: Ethnicity in an American Mill Town, 1870-1940* (Pittsburgh, 1977); and, with Roger Simon and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own — Blacks, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (Urbana, 1982). Also see Caroline Golab's *Immigrant Destinations* (Philadelphia, 1977).

2 The literature on Arab immigration and settlement in Pennsylvania is sparse indeed. Morris Zelditch wrote an M.A. thesis at the University of Pittsburgh on "The Syrians in Pittsburgh" in 1936. In *The Peoples of Pennsylvania: An Annotated Bibliography of Resource Materials*, David E. Washburn, ed. (Pittsburgh, 1981), the only entry relating even vaguely to Arabs cites a book written by Peter Markoe in 1787, *The Algerine* [sic] *Spy in Pennsylvania*. A brief but good overview of the Arab-American community in Allentown ("Fertile Valley," by Mary Ann Fay, 27-31) appears in *Taking Root, Bearing Fruit: The Arab-American Experience* (Washington, D.C., 1984).

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dence and Pawtucket, R.I.; Waterville, Maine; and Manchester, N.H. In Pennsylvania, the factory and mining towns and cities of Aliquippa, Allentown, Scranton, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Wilkes-Barre also drew Arabic-speaking immigrants.

One characteristic of the New Castle Syrian community, however, makes it unique. Whereas most communities of Arabic-speaking immigrants are predominantly Christian (and those that are mainly Muslim are by-and-large Sunni), the New Castle community has a significant proportion of Alawi, perhaps one of the highest relative concentrations in the country.

The Alawi are a small branch of Shii Islam, with approximately 850,000 adherents among the world's 130 million Muslims. Because so little published material exists on the Alawi — either in Syria or in the United States — this study will focus particular attention on them. In addition, information on the Syrian community at large and Syrian immigration to Pennsylvania will be presented.

Between 1900 and 1940, New Castle became the largest center for the production of tin in the United States and was called "Tin City" or "Tin Plate Town." Like the factories and mills in "Steel City" about sixty miles to the south, New Castle's burgeoning tin industry drew heavily on immigrant labor. The city's Muslim and Christian Syrian immigrants joined Italians, Poles, Welsh, Slovaks, Finns, Swedes, and Hungarians in the tin mills, which employed thousands, as well as in other industrial plants. When the First World War broke out, Syrian immigrants, some of whom could not yet speak English, were sent to fight in U.S. Army units. During the Depression, New Castle's Syrians responded to economic hardships in resourceful and unselfish ways. By the time the United States entered World War II, many of the community's second generation — the sons and daughters of the immigrants — enlisted in the armed forces or worked in factories whose operation was essential to the war effort. Like other "new immigrants," the Syrians were then objects of stereotyping and victims of discrimination.

As significant as their involvement in American society was the institutional development of the Syrian community and the retention of its age-old traditions, religious observances, and customs. New Castle's Syrian community was well developed by 1940. The Alawi, for example, had a formal organization, El-Fityet Alaween (The Alawi Youth), which had been serving social and religious functions for about ten years. Joyous celebrations and sad gatherings — weddings and funerals — were carried out under the leadership of a sheikh

(Muslim religious leader) in the general framework of the Alawi community. El-Fityet Alaween officers led regular meetings; Arabic was taught to the community's youth; members marched in local parades; and the group's annual picnics were "legend" in Western Pennsylvania.

II. New Castle in 1900

Long rows of factory smokestacks were the most prominent elements of the skyline in New Castle at the turn of the century. The smoke from the factories and mills, including the New Castle Steel and Tin Plate Co., cast shadows over the almost identical rows of working-class dwellings close by.

On Mahoning Avenue on the city's south side (or Fifth Ward), where many of the first Arab immigrants settled, some of the houses were very close to the industrial plants, separated from them, in some cases, only by the railroad tracks.[3] The clanking, hammering, and roaring of the mills, the soot, smoke, and gases — all the dirty cacophony of an industrial center — were everywhere.

But the noise and smoke, unpleasant though they were, meant work, and work is what drew New Castle's new immigrants. They labored in the city's thriving industries, which in 1900 included tin mills, blast furnaces, machine, car, and nail works, and railroads. In addition, Lawrence County blue stone was used in cement manufacturing, and fine local clay deposits were used by New Castle pottery factories.[4]

It was tin manufacturing, however, that became the city's most dynamic industry, bolstered in large part by the protection afforded by the McKinley Tariff Act of 1890. The New Castle Steel and Tin Plate Company was organized in 1892, starting with four mills, but it soon expanded to twenty. The Shenango Valley Steel Company opened for production with thirty mills in 1899 and joined with New Castle Steel to become part of the American Tin Plate Company.[5]

3 A bird's-eye view of New Castle as it appeared in 1896 was rendered in a drawing published by T. M. Fowler and James B. Moyer. It shows factories, churches, homes, businesses, and railroad lines, and is located in the map collection of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

4 Information on the geological resources of the area were obtained from Aaron L. Hazen's *20th Century History of New Castle and Lawrence County* (Chicago, 1908), 24. Although the book contains a wealth of information about the area, local history scholars know that volumes such as Hazen's must be used with care; they were compiled with profit as the main concern, and not with attention to scholarly method.

5 Bart Richards, *Lawrence County, A Compact History* (New Castle, 1968), 51.

These fifty mills made New Castle the largest single tin producer in the United States. Its preeminence lasted into the 1930s.[6]

III. Arabic-Speaking Immigration to Pennsylvania

Beginning in the 1880s and lasting until the start of World War I, steady streams of immigration from what was known as Greater Syria (present-day Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan) came to the Americas as a result of a combination of factors, including decline in agriculture, political turmoil and insecurity, and overpopulation. Most of the immigrants, however, left their towns and villages in order to pursue economic advancement.[7]

The pattern of immigration was similar to that seen in other nationalities and ethnic groups. A trickle of "pioneer" individuals and families went to the United States, got started in business, industry, or farming, and became the New World link in "chain migration." They sent letters to their families and friends; word spread that there were fortunes to be made in America. Those immigrants who did not have friends or relatives waiting with jobs and housing were "delivered" to worker-hungry industries by labor agents who were paid by the head. Many were naturally attracted to the growing Arab communities at the ports of entry. The largest early settlements of Syrian immigrants were in Boston and New York, but Syrians soon found their way into other industrial cities.

Evidence for Pennsylvania does not support the persistent belief that Syrian immigrants engaged primarily in peddling.[8] By far, most of them joined other immigrant groups in factories, mines, and railroads. Between 1899 and 1914, Syrian immigrants to the state were reported to number 11,140.[9] Although there were nineteen ethnic groups

6 By 1930, New Castle had fifty-six tin mills out of a national total of 279, still more than any other U.S. city. W. C. Cronemeyer, "The Development of the Tin-Plate Industry," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 13 (Apr. 1930): 133.

7 The size and nature of emigration from Syria is examined fully in Najib Saliba's "Emigration from Syria," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 3: 56-67.

8 "The Syrian immigrant occupation was peddling; no other immigrant group, with the exception of the German Jews, so completely identified with it. . . . Before 1914 at least 90 percent of the immigrants, including women and children, took up the trade in the United States, if only for a short time." From "Arabs in America: A Historical Overview," by Alixa Naff, in *Arabs in the New World*, ed. Sameer Y. Abraham and Nabeel Abraham (Detroit, 1983), 15.

9 Immigrant figures for this period are from a chart which appeared in Golab, 35.

with larger numbers of immigrants during this period, Syrians were more visible in industry than their numbers would suggest. In mining, for example, Caroline Golab notes that the original anthracite miners — Welsh, Scottish, English, Irish, and German — were a majority until 1875, "when Poles and Lithuanians began to outnumber them. Slovaks, Ukranians, Syrians and Italians (in that order) began to arrive after 1880." [10] Thus, in one industry at one time, Syrian arrivals outnumbered Italians, the state's largest immigrant group in the 1899-1914 period with just over half a million. In New Castle, most of the Syrian working men labored in the tin mills.

Ethnicity often played a key role in job acquisition for immigrants. There was a general perception in American society (even among many social scientists) that various "races" possessed specific qualities and dispositions. Golab writes that "by the late nineteenth century employers thought Italians were suitable for railroad and construction work and Poles for mines and metal work, and hired accordingly. When applying to employment agencies for bulk labor, they would indicate the race or nationality of laborers preferred for the job." [11] Thus we find steel companies in Pittsburgh in 1909 which advertised for "Tinners, Catchers and Helpers. To work in open shops. Syrians, Poles and Romanians preferred." [12]

Another example of this race-based hiring preference is a 1925 employment chart of the Central Tube Company of Pittsburgh. In one column the chart listed thirty-six "races," such as "Americans, White," "Slovaks," "Americans, Black," "Filipinos," "Syrians," "Jews," and so forth. They were rated good, fair, or poor in performing tasks like road repairs and those of a carpenter's helper in conditions which were "hot and dry," "cold and wet," "closely confined," and so on. Predictably, "White Americans" were rated good or fair at every type of work, and not poor at any job or working condition. On the other hand, Greeks, Belgians, Armenians, Jews, and others were considered poor in most areas and only fair in most of the rest. Syrians, according to this chart, were poor in twenty areas, fair in eleven, and good in only five.[13]

James Allay, a New Castle Alawi, whose parents came from Syria

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., 61.

12 From Robert Foerester, *The Italian Immigrant of Our Time* (Cambridge, 1919), 143-47, cited in Golab. See also John Bodnar, "The Procurement of Immigrant Labor: Selected Documents," *Pennsylvania History* XLI (Apr. 1974): 189-206.

13 The chart appears in Bodnar, Simon, and Weber, *Lives of Their Own*, 240.

and who worked in the tin mills, reported that Syrians were considered "second-class citizens." "I remember when I got hired they asked your nationality. . . . [The foreman] put me in the hot mills right away. . . . They classified the Irish, the English, the Welsh, the Germans, the Blacks, and so forth. They used to classify them at the time on what jobs they're suited to." [14]

IV. New Castle's Syrians — Data from the 1910 Census

Syrian settlement in New Castle started around 1900. A telephone directory for that year lists one name that may be Syrian: David Elias at 25 W. Long Avenue.[15] Residents report that the first decade of the century saw the real beginning of the community, and census figures confirm these reports. An examination of the information in the manuscripts of the Thirteenth Census for New Castle revealed that 191 residents were of Syrian origin or parentage, 108 of whom arrived in the United States after 1904.[16]

While the 1910 census contains much useful data on the early Syrian community, it is not without its peculiar pitfalls and should be used with great care. For example, the enumerators made many errors, such as giving some of the Syrian immigrants unusual names — Joe Mike, Charlie Jim, Albert Sam.[17]

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14 Interview with James Allay, New Castle, Pa., May 3, 1985.

15 *C. C. Robingson & Co.'s Combined Telephone Book (New Castle, Ellwood City, Wampum, Mahoningtown, Penna.)* (New Castle, 1900), 15. Elias is a common Christian Arab family name.

16 This and subsequent data on the New Castle Syrian community in 1910 were culled from microfilmed manuscripts of the Thirteenth Census of the United States, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

17 Foremost, however, is the problem of legibility. Some census-takers (or enumerators, as they were called) simply did very sloppy work, not only in the mechanics of filling out the forms, but also in attempting to record Arabic names in English. Thus there are various spellings for the same name (Esid and Acid for Assad, for example) and the garbling of some (Deep for Deeb, and Hury for Khoury). One enumerator rendered the country of origin of the Syrians on his list as "Cerian." Other census-takers listed the political and ethnic division the subjects fell under. For example, subjects from Austria-Hungary would be listed as "Aust.-Magyar" or "Aust.-Slovak," depending on what ethno-linguistic group they belonged to. Similarly, those from the Ottoman Empire would have their country of origin listed as "Turk.-Asia-Greek" or "Turk.-Asia-Syr." A good portion of New Castle's Syrians were mistakenly listed as "Servian" (a variation of Serbian) in the census forms, despite their markedly non-Slavic names — Kallil, Hassan, Abdol, and so forth. Underenumeration was another problem. Some residents who have identifiably Arab names appear in New Castle's 1909-1910 city directory but not in census manuscripts. Residents have reported that their relatives are missing from a list of Syrians gleaned from the census.

The reason for this is that when they arrived in New Castle they used only one name. In Syria they were usually known by their father's name. Thus a man named Yusef ibn-Ibrahim (Joseph, son of Abraham) in Syria would become Joe Abraham in New Castle.[18]

The shortcomings of the census materials, however troubling they may be, are far outweighed by their usefulness in developing a sketchy "snapshot" of the community. Included in the census manuscripts is information on size, location (by street address) and demographic makeup of the community, the occupations of the working-age population, and date of arrival in the United States.

The exact size of the Alawi community cannot be ascertained from the census figures since religious affiliation was not recorded, but several names on the lists were common to the Alawi community, such as Assad and Deeb. On this basis alone one can count at least forty-five Alawi (23 percent of the city's Syrian immigrant population) and assume that there were probably more.[19] The Syrian community had the same features which distinguished many fledgling immigrant groupings. Its population was relatively young (only seventeen of the 191 were older than thirty-three) and there were about twice as many males as females.

These figures reflected the large proportion (28 percent) of single male boarders, most of whom worked in the tin mills and lived with Syrian families. In most of the homes there were no more than a handful of boarders,[20] but in the house shared by the Mike Albert and

18 In 1939 the Works Progress Administration gathered information on the ethnic communities of New Castle. The citation is from a chapter on the Syrians in the WPA's draft report (hereafter called WPA Ethnic Survey). The WPA obtained its information on New Castle's Syrians from interviews with Olga Nahas of Division Street and Abe Abraham of Long Avenue. Record Group 13: Records of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, WPA Ethnic Survey, Job #126, "Tin Plate Town," Part II, Chapter V, "The Syrians," 6. Another way Syrians got "American" names was when they were registered for school, according to Mary Andy. Interview, New Castle, Pa., May 3, 1985.

19 The Alawi community grew gradually from its small beginnings. According to the WPA Ethnic Survey, there were 200 Muslims (most of whom were Alawi) and 1,100 Christian Syrians in the community in 1939. An estimate was made in 1985 by Omar Abdoe, a lifelong resident of the city who is intimately familiar with its Syrian community. According to him there are 500 Muslims and 1,250 Christian Arab-Americans.

20 About $3 per month was paid by immigrants to sleep and eat in New Castle's boarding houses in the 1920s and 1930s according to John Bodnar, "The Italians and Slavs of New Castle: Patterns in the New Immigration," *Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 55 (July 1972): 274. Syrian immigrants probably paid a similar amount to board in the homes of their countrymen.

Samuel Deeb families at 334 Mahoning Avenue there were seven boarders, and down the street at number 518, two Syrian families put up fifteen boarders. With such large numbers of men who came and went from their rooms at the change of each shift at the mills, the women of the house were kept constantly busy with cooking, cleaning, washing, and shopping. Some of the boarders stayed on for a few years and returned to Syria with the money they saved. Others settled in the neighborhood and married Syrian brides, either local or brought from the old country. Many of the workers sent portions of their earnings back to their families in Syria.

Of the community's thirty-two married couples, twenty-five had children, twenty-nine of whom were born in the United States. Two-thirds of the 101 working-age males (sixteen and older) reported that they labored in the tin mills as doublers, heaters, catchers, roughers, screw boys, and helpers.[21] There were twenty-one peddlers, two of whom were women. No other women reported any occupation. There were seven fruit merchants, one barber, a stone contractor, and a confectioner.

In addition, one resident reported that there was a coffee house in 1910 owned by Jamil Rabeeah, a member of the Alawi community. The coffee house is one institution (it was more than a mere business) which many Syrian communities transplanted from their homelands. It served as a social gathering place and a hub of information and gossip. The men of the community would spend hours playing cards and dominoes and sipping strong coffee from small cups or glasses.

21 Since such a large proportion of the Syrians worked in the tin mills, it may be instructive to describe the nature of their various tasks. The source of most of this information is James Allay, interview cited.

The heater took two steel plates and heated them up before putting them, one on top of the other, into a rolling machine which flattened them. At the other end of the machine the catcher took the sheets out and sent them back to the heater. The plates would be passed through the rolling machine several times, with the screw boy tightening the rollers after each pass to make the plates ever thinner.

After the last pass, the catcher sent the plates to the single boy and the doubler, each of whom grabbed a plate and separated them so they wouldn't stick. The doubler then put the plates in a folding machine which "doubled" the two plates into four. The doubler cut the rough edges off the plates and sent them through the rollers again. After several doublings and passes through the rolling machine, the plates reached the proper thickness and were sent out of the "hot mills" to the openers where they were cut to size and separated from each other. The plates were then sent through a "cold roller" and annealed, pickled (rinsed), dipped into tin, and rolled one last time.

As noted earlier, the community originally clustered near the tin mills, on the city's south side. Three-fourths (146) of the Syrians lived on four streets: Mahoning (seventy-six), Sciota (thirty-nine), Washington (twenty), and Moravia (eleven).

V. Beginnings of the Alawi Community: 1900-1918

The Alawi sect keeps its beliefs and rites secret, but it is known that their main tenets are similar to those of the Ismaili sect of Shii Islam and that their liturgy contains many Christian borrowings.[22] The heartland of the Alawi is in the Ansariyah Mountains around the port of Latakia, Syria. They have villages scattered to the north (into Turkey) and south (into Lebanon). Most of New Castle's Alawi come from the villages of Bourj Safita, Drakeesh, and Hosn, which are about twenty miles inland from the coastal town of Tartous and some sixty miles south of Latakia.

Most of the population engaged in rural production (agriculture and handcrafts) and, by the second half of the nineteenth century, were undergoing economic hardships. Thousands left towns and villages to find opportunity in Egypt and the Americas.

According to accounts by several New Castle Alawi, some of the group's early immigrants did not go straight to New Castle after arriving at Ellis Island or another port of entry. They initially lived and worked in other Pennsylvania industrial towns like West Newton, New Kensington, Monessen, and Smithton.[23]

During the period under examination, the three main religious groups in New Castle's Syrian community — Syrian Orthodox, Maronite Catholic, and Muslim — got along well with each other. Only after the 1982 invasion of Lebanon did tensions arise among the groups, reflecting in part the sectarian conflict thousands of miles away. Some long-time Alawi residents remember the more harmonious days and lament the loss of simple togetherness based on a common language and culture.

Although they worshipped in different places and in different ways,

22 A great division in Islam spawned the Sunni and Shii branches. The Shii believe that Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, is the rightful successor to Muhammad as the spiritual leader of the Islamic community. The Sunni believe that spiritual legitimacy was handed down along a different line. The Alawi are a Shii denomination and they take their name from Ali, whom they revere as the incarnation of God.

23 Interviews with Nazera Hamed, 72, James Allay and Mary Andy, 75, New Castle, Pa., May 3, 1985.

the Alawi had more in common with their fellow Syrians than with Italians, Poles, or Welshmen. Their social and economic behavior did not differ significantly from that of the Christian Syrians. They lived in the same neighborhoods, celebrated as a community, worked together, and shopped at each others' stores. According to James Allay, his father Abraham, who ran a store on Mahoning Avenue, acted as a banker for the community, a common practice among immigrant groups for whom the language barrier prevented the ready use of established banks. "Anybody who spoke Arabic, be he Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox, they gave him their money and he kept it in his safe," said Allay of his father. Syrians would visit each other, going to a different house each evening. "It was like a picnic every day," according to Nazera Hamed. "We used to do good," said Sam Hamett of the togetherness of the Syrians. When they held picnics on Sundays on a field by Mahoning Avenue they "all ate just like one family," he said.[24]

The first generation of youths in the Alawi community learned Arabic from their parents, most of whom felt more comfortable with their native tongue. In addition, some of the young boys of the community took formal language instruction from a sheikh who lived with one of the Alawi families. The family would provide room and board for the sheikh and the community would raise funds — through dinners and other events — to pay him a small salary which would permit him to live in comfort and send money back to his family. Arabic classes were held every day after school and involved the difficult task of reading from the Quran, the Muslim holy book. The boys carried their own chairs to the home in which the day's classes were conducted. James Allay said he was once disciplined by the sheikh for skipping class — with a willow switch he had to cut himself. There were never any girls in the classes. "It was our custom," Allay said. "The girls would stay home and help their mothers and the boys would get educated. Some of them were smarter than we were. Some taught themselves to read and write Arabic."[25]

The girls' desire to obtain a complete education is illustrated by the comments of Mary Andy and Nazera Hamed. "I wanted to go to high school but we couldn't afford it," said Andy. "And my mother needed me so I stayed at home and helped with the cleaning and cooking." Similarly, Hamed said, "I did want to go to school because I liked

24 Ibid., Allay, Hamett.
25 Ibid., Allay.

education. . . . But my mother wasn't too well and the kids needed someone to look after them." Andy reported that there was a Miss Ferguson who was the nurse at the tin mill, and her house was set up to take care of the children of the workers, with a playground in the yard and a small library in the front room. Andy would go to read at Miss Ferguson's house, where cooking and sewing classes were also conducted.[26]

The working-class neighborhoods into which the Syrians and other groups settled were made up mostly of two-story houses with porches in the front and backyards big enough to set up grape arbors and plant small gardens. A good number of the Syrians bought or rented agricultural land on the outskirts of New Castle or farmed on small plots near their homes in the city.[27] The south side community was largely self-sufficient because of the thriving (if small) commercial strip on Long Avenue on which a number of Syrian shops were located.

A major shift in the settlement of the community occurred when the Shenango River and the Neshannock Creek flooded on March 27, 1913, after two days of continuous rain. The Shenango tin mill had to be evacuated, four bridges were swept away, and there were huge losses of property and merchandise.[28] Many of those living near the mills had to move away from the low-lying areas and up to Long Avenue, but the Alawi and other Syrians remained mainly in the south side area.

At the start of U.S. involvement in World War I, recent immigrants were recruited and quickly sent to the front, despite the fact that they spoke little or no English. Sam Hamett was one of these. He came to the United States in 1913 at the age of twenty-five. Five years later, after just a few weeks of training, he was shipped out in an Army unit to France, where he fought, was wounded, and went back to the front until the war ended. Other Alawi veterans of the Great War included Haje Hammed and Charles Monsour.[29]

26 Ibid., Hamed, Andy.

27 Members of the Alawi community reported that there were at least six of their families who farmed, joining other immigrants who worked on the land. For instance, Bodnar reports in "Italians and Slavs in New Castle" that among early Polish settlers most families "had a small plot of ground, a horse, a cow and poultry" (273).

28 Richards, 55-56.

29 The names of deceased Alawi World War I veterans were obtained from the gravestones in Valley View Cemetery where about 70 of the community's dead are buried.

Mary Andy points to faces she recognizes in 1939 photograph of El-Fityet Alaween as Omar Abdoe, an Alawi active in the Arab-American community, observes. (Photo by author)

Albert Sallie (far right), a New Castle Alawi, worked on a WPA crew in a quarry near the city.

VI. The Community Grows and Develops: 1919-1930

During the post-war period Syrian immigration to the United States declined sharply, and the New Castle community's growth depended on the increase in size of families and the settlement of Syrians already in the Americas. As in the early period of immigration and settlement, residents of the area drew in relatives and friends through correspondence. Abraham Allay and others wrote letters to Alawi in southern Pennsylvania, Mississippi, and as far away as Mexico, encouraging them to come to New Castle. The tin mills and other industrial plants continued to be the major source of employment. Some Arab-Americans became active in the labor movement. James Allay was a shop steward in a Chicago steel plant, and Jack Moses, an Orthodox Palestinian, helped organize a union (despite company harassment) in Aliquippa before settling in New Castle. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, more and more Syrian-Americans ventured into businesses and professions. For those wanting to open a grocery store, all that was needed was sufficient capital and a suitable site. For some who wanted to enter the professions it was more difficult. James Allay's son wanted to go to medical school, but his high school principal called Allay to his office and intimated that if Allay didn't "know" anyone who could smooth the way, his son would have little chance of pursuing medical studies. Nonetheless, with the native-born population coming into the job market with full English proficiency, more education, and greater acculturation than their parents, they were able to move into higher positions.

During this period there was a shifting in the community's composition. The immigrant generation was reaching middle- and old-age, and the second generation (many of them born between 1905 and 1910) were getting married and giving birth to the community's third generation. By 1924, the Alawi community began to bury its dead in its own corner of a local cemetery. At the age of forty-four, Sam Isaac was put to rest in Valley View Cemetery in a plot which is near the cemetery's entrance. One-year-old Mariam David Abraham was buried nearby the same year. In the years to come, most of New Castle's Alawi found final repose on this same shady hillside, with many of the tombstones bearing inscriptions in English and Arabic and holding oval-shaped visages of the deceased on white ceramic.

Even though most of the Alawi couples getting married during this period had been born in the United States, they adhered to tradition and had a sheikh preside over their weddings. (One couple reported that they nonetheless went afterward to the justice of the peace to

make it "official" by United States standards.) During the 1920s Sheikh Abdel Hamid presided over Muslim religious ceremonies, followed later by Sheikh Mahmoud and Sheikh Ali. The wedding feast usually centered on a lamb carefully roasted over an open fire, and included Syrian delicacies such as Arab bread, meat and rice rolled in grape leaves, *kibbeh* (seasoned meat, rolled and fried), and *tabouleh* (a salad made with parsley, onions, lemon, and bulgar wheat).

For the young, Arabic classes continued under the direction of the sheikh, but around 1925 an Englishman taught Arabic and mathematics, according to James Allay.

Just as they were getting their feet on firmer financial ground, the Alawi were struck by the Depression. Fortunately for many of them, their desire to engage in growing crops and planting their own gardens saved them from hunger and provided others with welcome relief from hardship. James Allay's family lost its home and grocery store during the crash, and they had to start over on a two-acre rented plot of land. "I used to sell bunches of parsley in the wintertime to the wholesale store — two bunches for a nickel," he said. The Allays also got stale bread from restaurants to feed their chickens. "Our family pulled together." Sam Hamett worked on the family's 120-acre rented farm in nearby Eastbrook. He remembers secretly leaving potatoes at the doorstep of a hungry family during the Depression and lending money to the needy. The parents of Mary Andy bought a Neshannock Township farm in 1924 and during the Depression brought vegetables and milk to "people who really needed it."

Albert and Jora Sallie came to New Castle in 1923 from New Kensington, Pa. Albert was a farmer on his own land back in Syria and did mill work when he came to the United States. However, he returned to cultivation when he settled in New Castle and grew vegetables on a small plot in the town's south side. Nazera Hamed, the Sallies' daughter, remembers the generosity of her father:

> Everybody knew that if they were really hungry Albert Sallie would have food for them. . . . We used to get people from all over — men from the tracks. Some of them would be dead hungry. He would bring them down [to the house]. When we'd come down (seven thirty, eight o'clock in the morning) there'd be bums sitting down. He'd pour coffee for them. He'd be feeding them. He was *too* good-hearted.[30]

In addition to helping the destitute who happened by, Albert Sallie was among the men of New Castle who worked on the WPA work

30 Interview with Nazera Hamed.

crew that had been set up to provide work for unemployed workers in the area.

Perhaps it was the rigors of the Depression, or perhaps it was exposure to the organizations of other ethnic communities, but whatever the impetus, New Castle's Alawi reached an important milestone in 1930 when they decided to formalize their community activities by founding El-Fityet Alaween, The Alawi Youth. The Italians, Poles, and other groups had well-established churches and social organizations. Now it was time for New Castle's Syrians to establish their own places to worship, to meet, and to celebrate. In 1930 the Maronite Church of St. John the Baptist was founded, and in 1933 came St. Elias Syrian Orthodox Church.[31]

VII. A Community with a Club: 1931-1940

From the time of its founding, El-Fityet Alaween became the focus of religious, social, and cultural activities for the Alawi community.[32] The men had initially met in each others' homes, and then in a building bought by the club. After a while some of the women decided that if the men could hold meetings, so could they. They organized *haflehs* (parties) of their own several times a year.

Sam Hamett said he was the treasurer for the club for twenty-two years, and he remembers attending monthly meetings at eleven o'clock on Sunday mornings. Funds were raised through monthly dues (of a dollar per member) and events such as dinners and picnics.

Alawi in New Castle remember their picnics with pride and nostalgia. They were held in July every year and lasted an entire weekend. The women worked together into the early morning hours preparing foods that required skill: *kibbeh, baklawa,* and bread. The men cooked the food that called mainly for patience: whole lamb and lamb *kebab* (or, as it came to be known to the Pennsylvania Syrians, "lamb on a rod"). Sam Hamett said that "no one ever cooked the meat, only me." People came from the surrounding counties and townships and even from Ohio and New York. Nazera Hamed said the picnic "was like a legend. Everybody goes to the Alaween picnic." In addition to being the major fundraiser for the club (reportedly bringing in as much as five thousand dollars), the picnics were the biggest social gathering for the area's Syrians.

31 WPA Ethnic Survey, 2-3.

32 Information on El-Fityet Alaween was obtained through interviews with some of the organization's older members.

Samra and Sam Hamett, two elders of the Alawi community, hold photos of themselves at a younger age and of their son. (Photo by author)

Members and friends of El-Fityet Alaween (The Alawi Youth) posed in 1939 in their meeting room.

The Alawi Youth Club marched with its own flag in New Castle's holiday parades, and the Alawi war veterans, whose names are recorded on a large list which hangs in the club, marched with other veterans. The club's building was a gathering place for members, and the original building on Long Avenue had a separate room for prayers. El-Fityet Alaween gave financial support to the activities of other community groups by buying blocks of raffle tickets and attending their functions. The poor of the Alawi community were also beneficiaries of the club's funds. People needing donations sent written requests to the club, or their cases were brought to the club's attention orally, and the officers would decide how much would be given.

The club's most solemn function was carrying out Alawi funeral traditions, including washing the body (by "whoever was brave") before it was laid out in the family home or at the club. Mary Andy said that "half a dozen men would stay all night with the body [because] we don't believe in leaving them alone." There would be a "mercy dinner," or *spouh*, for the mourners at the family's expense, or, if they could not afford it, the club's. Sam Hamett said that he personally killed many a lamb in the prescribed manner for the funeral meals. After the services the body was interred at Valley View, where the community's mourners could visit and lay flowers. Forty days afterward there would be another dinner.

VIII. The Syrian Community in the 1930s

Some aspects of the daily lives of the Syrians of New Castle during the late 1930s were described in a Works Progress Administration paper on the city's ethnic communities. (See footnote 18.) Although it is a sympathetic view of the community, the seven-page article contains overblown and romanticized prose reflecting American perceptions of the Middle East more than Arab-American realities. It begins:

> Here in this city of ours, thousands of miles away from the heart of Asia and Africa, the Moslem belief is professed by some two hundred of our fellow citizens. Here surrounded by tin mills, street cars, electric lights and all the paraphernalia of a great occidental civilization, the mystic East still lives in the hearts of some of our people.[33]

The article mentions El-Fityet Alaween and notes that

> The Moslems in New Castle, in their marriages and divorces abide by the civil laws of our country.

33 WPA Ethnic Survey, 1.

> Being such a small community the local Moslems have no Mosque, but hold their religious services in rooms, which, to our knowledge have never been entered by Christians.[34]

Only snippets of information are presented about the Maronite and Orthodox communities, but some attention is devoted to the "Culture and Art" of the Syrians. For instance, the article reports that "for musical entertainment the Syrians of New Castle are accustomed to gather together to listen to Syrian programs via short wave from South America and stations here in the United States."

The article mentions that a handmade table, which is "a beautiful example of [Syrian] native art," is "in the possession of one of the local Syrians." The table is inlaid with "one hundred thousand pieces of wood of various kinds, and of shells and camel bone." It was brought to New Castle from Damascus by a local Syrian artist who "has done a number of beautiful paintings on glass, using brilliant and costly colors, having for his subjects, natural settings of birds, trees and animals." Shakir Soloman, Richard Abraham, Sam Abraham, Simaan Habib, and Habib John Habib are listed as New Castle Syrians who were famous throughout the Arabic-speaking world for their poetry.

The "Syro-Americans," according to the article, "have given their adopted country the love and devotion they might have bestowed upon their own land, had they been able to call it their own." About 80 percent of the Syrian-born residents of New Castle were reported to have been naturalized citizens, and about 50 percent were property holders. In a glowing tribute to Syrian good citizenship, the article stated: "As is typical of the Syrian people, criminal and civil offenses are rare, as are separation and divorce." It concludes that "New Castle may well be grateful for the contribution which these Near-Eastern people have made to our Western civilization in the way of culture and good citizenship." [35]

By the end of the 1930s, the Syrians had moved into the professions of "medicine, preaching, nursing and teaching." They ran restaurants, meat shops, and dry-cleaning businesses. The tin mills were running, but not for much longer. They would close down in the 1940s, victims of automated methods for producing tin plate.

The 1940s census showed a drop in New Castle's population for the first time — down one thousand from 1930. But the Syrian community continued growing and becoming more integrated into the

34 Ibid., 2.

35 WPA Ethnic Survey, 7.

community. The census for 1940 also showed that of four small industrial cities in Western Pennsylvania (Ellwood City, Beaver Falls, New Castle, and Aliquippa), New Castle had the highest percentage (.54 percent) of residents born in Syria.[36]

In their language, customs, foods, and crafts, New Castle's Syrians may well have introduced a bit of "the mystic East" into the industrial community where they settled, but by the coming of World War II they had become assimilated enough to be praised for their citizenship and admired for their industrious achievements in New Castle and in their own Syrian community. ■

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36 The information is listed in a table on page 259 of *Steeltown*, by Charles R. Walker (New York, 1950). The census figures illustrate the problem of underenumeration. The WPA Ethnic Survey reported in 1939 that there were about 1,300 Syrians in New Castle while the census counted 257 Syrian-born residents in 1940. Even if the census figure were to be generously multiplied by four (to account for uncounted children of Syrian-born parents), it would not add up to the WPA estimate, which is based on interviews with community members.

THE FORT PITT FLOOD OF 1762

Fort Pitt 12th January 1762

Sir.

I have to inform your Exellency of the great damages this Fort has Sustained by an Extraordinary Flood the 9th instant.

[After great snowfalls in December—Editor], we had a Rain that continued all the night and next day [January 8 and 9] with a universal Thaw.

The 9th the Rivers run 10 feet over the Banks, which had not happened at any flood Since this Place is built.

All our Casemattes with our Provisions were under Water, and all our Precautions could not prevent its penetrating likewise in the Powder Magazine.

The Water came upon us thro' the Drains, Gate, and sally Ports, and boiled out of the ground in several Parts of the Area.

I had the Battoes brought in the Fort loaded them with Provisions, and as we had four feet Water in the area & 9 in the Casemattes, I sent Part of the Garrison which could be of no further Service in the Place, to the upper Town upon a rising ground, and kept only as many men in the Fort as I could carry off in the Battoes, should we be reduced to that Extremity.

* * * * *

[The water continued to rise until one a.m. of January 10 and began to fall about 10 a.m. of the 11th.]

* * * * *

The 11th we could discover Part of our Disaster. All the Sod Work of last year and great Part of the Year before, tumbled down, and a good deal of Earth and number of Pique[ts] washed away. The Courtin on the Monongahela finished two years ago, has suffered less, tho' Part of the Sod is gone.

* * * * *

I cannot ascertain yet our Loss of Provisions, Ammunition, and Stores. As we had just done Salting the meat was still in Bulk, or in Barrels without Heads, we have got it all out of the Water, and it must be Salted over again. I have ordered up some Salt lefft at Bedford, & acquainted the Contractors of the quantity wanted besides, unless we can get it Soon, Part of the meat will be lost.

The Flour in Bulk being in a Granary above Ground is Safe, and what is in Barrell can not have Suffered much by the Water.

A distressing Loss will be the Powder, We could only get 13 Barrills out, and cannot get in the Magazine yet, to know what can be Saved. It was extremely bad before, having been damaged in the damp Magazines of Bedford & Ligonier.

* * * * *

The long Barrack built in 1759 for the Artillery and all the Houses upon the Banck of the Allegheny beyond the Epaulement, having been carried off, and several in the Lower Town. No Lives have been lost but most of the Effects of the Traders by the Suddenness of the flood, tho' we gave them all the assistance in our Power.

* * * * *

[I can] only observe from this fatal Experience that Sod Works and Magazines under Ground cannot be depended on, at the Confluence of these two Rivers . . .

I have the honor to be w^th great Respect Sir Your most obedient and most Humble Servant

Henry Bouquet

(to Sir Jeffery Amherst; copy in archives of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania)